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ABSTRACT

Under the California Community Colleges' (CCC's) current grading policy, a symbol of W is permitted to designate that a student withdrew from a course before a locally determined drop deadline. There is no allowance for a symbol, however, that accurately denotes that students have ceased to participate at a point in the term beyond which they are allowed to withdraw. In an effort to improve accountability at the colleges by more accurately documenting student outcomes, the Executive Committee of the CCC's Academic Senate was charged with developing a symbol other than an F to indicate that a student had separated from a course without officially withdrawing. The Committee originally considered two proposals: assigning the symbols WP or WF to designate that the student was passing or failing at the time of withdrawal, or assigning WA, WB, WC, WD, or WF to designate the actual letter grade the student was receiving. Since the last day that withdrawals are allowed varies substantially from college to college, it was determined that neither the pass/fail nor graded withdrawal symbols would provide a consistent reflection of student progress. The Committee subsequently recommended that FW be assigned to students not completing courses and that it be assigned the value of zero in calculating students' grade point averages. (HAA)

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***Spring 1997***

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JC 970 407

# Toward Accurate Student Performance Evaluation: Symbol for Unofficial Withdrawal

The Academic Senate for California Community Colleges

*Adopted Spring 1997*

**1996-97 Educational Policies Committee**
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## Abstract

Resolution 14.1 S95 calls for the Executive Committee to develop a proposal for a symbol other than an F to indicate when a student separated from a course without officially withdrawing. The concern is that an examination of student outcomes may incorrectly lead the faculty to change curriculum or pedagogy in light of student failures recorded instead of an official withdrawal. The resolution calls for the value of the grade to be zero in the calculation of the GPA.

*14.1 S95 Symbol for Withdrawal*
*Therefore be it resolved that the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges seek changes in Title 5 grading policies and procedures to allow for an evaluative symbol other than an F indicating an unofficial withdrawal by the student after the drop date, such a symbol to be computed in the GPA as zero points, and*

*Be it further resolved that the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges recommend to local senates that this symbol would be used in situations where there is not enough data to assign a conventional grade.*

The recommended option is the assigning of the symbol FW (zero points in GPA) to designate a failure due to an unofficial withdrawal for the student that ceases to participate without officially withdrawing.

## Introduction

The Academic Senate for California Community Colleges proposes that the option of assigning a symbol which designates that a student unofficially withdraw from a course be given to faculty in the regulations and statutes. Faculty would exercise their academic judgment in determining whether an FW should be assigned. Such a symbol could serve as a more informative and descriptive measure of student outcomes on which policy, pedagogy, and curriculum decisions are based. In addition, the symbol would provide a future explanation to the student in the future.

Presently, the unofficial withdrawal skews the data on student failure creating a grossly inaccurate premise upon which significant educational policy may be based. Faculty may assign a grade of F because the student has ceased to attend and participate in a class and thus erroneously suggest that the student had a lack of commitment or an inability to achieve the objectives. As well, such an F could suggest that a teacher has shown faulty pedagogy or has somehow failed to teach the objectives of the class effectively.

### Accountability and Student Outcomes

Increasing public and political emphasis on accountability has affected the discussions in higher education. While structures traditionally a part of higher education such as accreditation and professional certification have focused on overall quality not necessarily defined by quantitative student outcomes, the imposition of frameworks, and constructs normally reserved for the corporate culture have caused educators to examine their work in terms of student outcomes. Legislation and regulation, public and political discourse all have been major forces calling on public education to be accountable and demonstrate that accountability in a more quantitative fashion.

Colleges are attempting to respond to public and political emphasis on accountability with improved data on student access, success, persistence, and transfer. Better indicators related to course completion, failure and/or withdrawal could yield more accurate information on student patterns. In turn, this could enhance faculty program review and evaluation efforts.

Student Equity, Matriculation, Transfer Centers, and target population programs all support the successful achievement of the mission of the California community colleges by specifically calling upon the faculty to make modifications in the student's educational experience based upon the outcome data. Such efforts increase the pressure for faculty to examine the individual and aggregate student outcomes in their classes and work to increase levels of student success. To that end, faculty should look at the curriculum content and pedagogy, student behavior patterns and resources, and institutional support services to determine how to serve students more effectively and facilitate their success.

Faculty have primary responsibility for curriculum, educational programming and student success. These professional responsibilities in the context of student access and success, mean accurate student evaluations and outcome measures are essential. While other efforts include the pursuit of the permissive use of plus/minus symbols in order to more accurately evaluate student performance and have that evaluation reflected in the assigned grade, a symbol designating that the student unofficially withdrew from a course could serve as a very informative and descriptive measure for faculty examining student outcomes.

Current research is flawed because the causes for the attainment of a failing grade are not clear. The research does not recognize family emergencies, illness, personal or family catastrophes that may result in the abrupt and unofficial withdrawal of a student. When a student unofficially withdraws, the level which he or she has achieved in the course is not measured. Without the assignment of a grade to indicate an unofficial withdrawal, the F may be interpreted as a lack of commitment to student success or a deficiency in pedagogy by the faculty. The F implies that a student cannot or has not achieved a minimum standard for the course.

Students unofficially withdraw for various reasons; perceptions of course difficulty, emergency family situations, personal illness, and/or socio-economic imperatives that take priority over completing the class. Similarly, colleges serving populations with few economic resources, persistence and retention rates may vary with major economic events of the community such as the closing or opening of a major employing industry. Such complex factors affecting the student persistence are not clearly reflected in a single symbol like F or W and tend to be recorded simply as a F denoting student failure to master course content.

**Current Policy**

Under the current grading policy, faculty are permitted to assign A through F for symbols of student achievement for completed courses. A symbol of W is permitted to designate that a student withdrew from a course before a locally determined drop deadline and is not responsible for completing the course with an A through F grade.

There is no allowance for a symbol which would accurately denote that a student has ceased to participate at a point in the term when the student is responsible for completing the course with an A through F grade. Faculty are then left with no other option than to assign a grade of F.

**Options**

Two options considered include the (1) assigning a WP and WF to designate that the student was passing or failing at the time of his or her unofficial withdrawal from the course and (2) assigning WA, WB, WC, WD or WF to designate the actual letter grade (which follows the W) the student

was receiving as of the last day of active participation. All of the symbols would be calculated as a zero when determining grade point average (GPA), thus having the same effect on the student's GPA as does an F.

Because the last day officially to withdraw varies substantially from college to college, the WP, WF, WA, WB, WC, WD or WF would be of no consistent value. For example, a student might receive a WA based on the work in a half term, while another could receive a WA based on attending the entire term but missing the final exam. Interpretation of the symbols during transcript evaluations could be inconsistent. Therefore, the options that include the assigning a WP, WF, WA, WB, WC, WD or WF were rejected and are not proposed.

**Proposal**

In rejecting the two options, a third option emerged that includes the assigning of the symbol FW to designate "a failure due to an unofficial withdrawal" for the student that ceases to participate without officially withdrawing. At a minimum, failure to take the final examination should be considered an unofficial withdrawal. The symbol should be calculated as a zero when determining grade point average (GPA), thus having the same effect on the student's GPA as does an F.

The Board of Governors of California Community Colleges should amend the grading policy regulations authorizing the permissive use of a symbol for failure due to unofficial withdrawal (FW) for the student that ceased to participate in the course without officially withdrawing.

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